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Clarisse Herrenschmidt

ZARATHUSTRA'S
RITUAL: CONSERVING
A CHARISMATIC
DOMINATION?

Max Weber saw Zarathustra as a prophet by virtue of his “proclamation of a religious truth of salvation through personal revelation”¹—like any other prophet in the Weberian sense of the word. According to him, Zarathustra was the very example of an ethical prophet: “Thus, there remain only two kinds of prophets in our sense, one represented most clearly by the Buddha, the other with especial clarity by Zoroaster and Muhammad. The prophet may be primarily, as in the last cases, an instrument for the proclamation of a god and his will, be this a concrete or an abstract norm. Preaching as one who has received a commission from god, he demands obedience as an ethical duty.”²

Max Weber’s idea of Zarathustra was dependent on the state of the research on the Avesta, Mazdeism, and the history of ancient Iran of his time. We could therefore find these passages obsolete. However, by virtue of their author’s comparatist approach, as well as his stunning intellectual

Translated by Nancy Knezevic. An abbreviated French version of this article was presented at a conference on the theme “Come nasce una religione,” presented by Centro di Alti Studi per le Scienze Religiose (November 1–3, 2001). A French version of that text is scheduled to appear in the proceedings of the conference.

¹ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, 3 vols., trans. Ephraim Fischoff et al., ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (New York: Bedminster, 1968), 2:446.

² Ibid., 2:447.

clarity, they remain pertinent for contemporary research. Questions revolving around Zarathustra's charisma, not in the trivial meaning of this word, but in the Weberian sense of charismatic domination and its routinization, can help us reconsider certain aspects of Mazdeism.

Charisma is "applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a 'leader'."³ "Charisma" would only have one possible Iranian equivalent: the avestic *xwarənah*, which we translate as "glory" (according to the classical Persian term *farr*) or "fortune." But this word, so important in the conceptions of the Younger Avesta, does not appear in the most ancient texts, the Gāthās and the Yasna Haptanhāiti. It seems unlikely that we can find a notion, and even less a concept, in Old Avestan that would convey Zarathustra's "charisma." But, if the notion is absent from the language, the practices of speech perceptible in one of the five Gāthās could very well present a social situation that would show Zarathustra's "charisma," as I hope to demonstrate in this article.

The Avestan *manθrān* could be equivalent to our "prophet"; in the Gāthās "chants," ancient texts in verse and in Old Avestan, this word refers to he who has understood the *manθra* "thought medium," thus "expression, formula" of Ahura Mazdā, and who also puts the *manθra* to work; that is, it refers to Zarathustra. The quality of *manθrān* advances the art of expressing thought, giving it a quality of effective speech; the Gāthās, however, addressed to the gods about the ritual that men perform for their attention,⁴ are themselves words that accompany the ritual. Given this ancient Iranian reverence for speech, let us admit that the "prophecy" of Zarathustra might resemble the "prophecy" dear to the European tradition.

We must therefore turn to the Gāthās to know more. But the Gāthās are very difficult texts, as Stanley Insler says: "Because of their relative brevity and the almost complete lack of earlier or contemporary works of Old Iranian literature, the Gāthās of Zarathustra truly are a text bound by seven seals."⁵ Indeed, one need only read two translations of the Gāthās by two different but equally competent authors to realize that both their readings and their interpretations differ.

³ Ibid., p. 241.

⁴ At least this is how Jean Kellens and Eric Pirart see it; see their *Textes vieil-avestiques*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden, 1988–91) (hereafter cited as TVA).

⁵ Stanley Insler, *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra*, Acta Iranica 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1975), p. 1.

Not only is this the case because of their linguistic difficulty, but also because of the following problem: should their interpretations take into account the Mazdean tradition that comes later, meaning the Younger Avesta and the Middle Persian texts, or, on the contrary, should one stick to the Old Avestan texts? The Gāthās alone, which make up a very small corpus, do not allow a thorough understanding of their language—comparison with Vedic Sanskrit is necessary. Helmut Humbach, who renewed gāthic studies, explains it thus: “Consulting the large corpus of Old Indian texts, among which the extremely archaic Rigveda is the most prominent, is absolutely essential for any serious study of the Gāthās. . . . Comparison of Zarathustra’s seventeen Gāthā hymns with the 1,028 sacrificial hymns of the Rigveda reveals that the two collections, the Iranian and the Indian, have a single common linguistic and cultural background. . . . Both, the Gāthās and the Rigveda moreover, belonged to the same literary genre and their historical relationship has left numerous traces in the phraseology and the religious concepts of the Gāthās.”⁶

Stanley Insler, Eric Pirart, Jean Kellens, and Helmut Humbach are the four experts whose recent works on the Gāthās are my focus. They have operated according to the philological basis of comparison with Vedic Sanskrit. Despite this common foundation, they have their own historical and comprehensive points of view, and consequently their interpretations of the Gāthās differ.

Stanley Insler’s beautiful work can seem biased, overly affected by his admiration for Zarathustra. Insler believes that the Gāthās are hymns and poetry composed by Zarathustra himself and could reveal “the prophet’s intellectual evolution within his own fragmentary works,”⁷ and this high regard constitutes a bias with which a researcher may or may not be able to work. Furthermore, he tends to minimize the importance of ritual: “It may be true that the prophet has emerged from a society actively engaged in the performance of the traditional cultic rites . . . but above all this, the focus and emphatic insistence of the prophet’s hymns are directed towards a purpose and unity of thought which oppose the empty, mechanical methods of the ritual.”⁸ This passage embodies the expert view of Insler, with which one may disagree, since anthropology, particularly that of ancient India, shows that ritual is precisely neither mechanical nor empty.⁹

⁶ Helmut Humbach, *Die Gāthās des Zarathustra*, 2 vols. (Heidelberg, 1959). Here, I quote his second work on the Gāthās (H. Humbach, in collaboration with Josef Elfenbein and P. Oktor Skjaervø, *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra and Other Old Avestan Texts*, 2 vols. [Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991], 1:73).

⁷ Insler, p. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁹ Especially the work of Charles Malamoud on brahmanic India (*Cuire le monde: Rite et pensée en Inde ancienne* [Paris: La Découverte, 1989]).

Despite this, I find Insler's approach satisfactory insofar as he works with Old Avestan texts while taking into account certain crucial religious questions, such as "Why serve god? What can give Man dignity and happiness in the world?"¹⁰—questions that were asked during antiquity by several civilizations and that rise to the surface in the Gāthās.

Jean Kellens and Eric Pirart's reading of Old Avestan texts strives to be more realistic. They treat the Gāthās as historical texts. The men whose names are mentioned "do not belong to myth"¹¹ because we can more or less reconstitute their kinship, and the gāthic community was busy fighting a meaningful fight, a "doctrinal conflict [which] has political conflict at its root. The gāthic circle's adversaries are accused of 'economic faults.'"¹² These authors recognize Zarathustra's very peculiar status—"a pivot of ritual, unique confidant of the gods and taking part, by these functions, in the divine universe, Zarathustra benefits from an exorbitant religious role, on the limits of divinisation"—and attribute this to his role in the ritual: "It is the plausible knowledge of the importance which gāthic conceptions attach to ritual: this one sacrilises the men in charge of it."¹³ According to Kellens and Pirart, the gāthic innovation, in comparison to the ancient religion common to Indo-Iranians, is to be found in the eschatological scope of sacrifice, in the welcoming of the sacrificer into paradise.¹⁴ Generally speaking, the authors seem to put aside a philosophico-religious reading of the Gāthās. This could raise a question. Indeed, what does it mean to hope for life after death and for paradise if questions regarding the divine, morality and immortality, the world, and man's deeds are not asked, explicitly or implicitly, in very different ways than they were in Greek philosophy, Judaism, Brahmanism, or Christianity? Still, I believe two important points can be taken from the works of Kellens and Pirart, Kellens alone, and, finally, Kellens and myself.¹⁵ First, insofar as we find "mention of the name Zarathustra in the third person,"¹⁶ Zarathustra is not systematically the one who says "I" in the Gāthās. There is another "I," whom I call "the cantor." Second, the Gāthās are speculative hymns which claim that the ritual offered to Ahura Mazdā is the best one possible because he is the god responsible for ordering the cosmos and

¹⁰ Insler, p. 22, who put it differently.

¹¹ TVA, 1:4.

¹² Ibid., 1:27.

¹³ These two quotes follow each other immediately (ibid., 1:21–22).

¹⁴ Ibid., 1:32–35.

¹⁵ Jean Kellens, *Zoroastre et l'Avesta ancien* (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 1991), and *Le panthéon de l'Avesta ancien* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1994); Clarisse Herrenschildt and Jean Kellens, "La question du rituel dans le mazdéisme ancien et achéménide," *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* (January–March 1994), pp. 45–67.

¹⁶ TVA, 1:19.

he gives prosperity during life and survival after death to those who give him worship.

Helmut Humbach was the modern pioneer of gāthic studies, which he renewed using comparison with Vedic Sanskrit. According to him, the Gāthās are a text whose very goal is ritual,¹⁷ but also “the only authentic religious and literary heritage left by Zarathustra,”¹⁸ “founder and prophet of the pre-islamic religion of Iran.”¹⁹ In his work, Humbach attempts to reconcile the comparison between Sanskrit and the later Mazdean tradition. One assumes that this would constitute the ideal situation, one that would help us understand both Mazdeism and its history. But the results are a bit disappointing. Let us take two examples. The Mazdean traditions of Sassanian, medieval, and modern times consider Zarathustra the author and voice of the Gāthās. But in certain gāthic passages, Zarathustra is mentioned in the third voice; in another he apostrophizes himself,²⁰ which seems strange if Zarathustra is speaking. However, according to Humbach, this is a real rhetorical form.²¹ In this case, why not reaffirm the rhetorical hypothesis by looking to Vedic literature to see if comparison might provide parallels? If it fails to provide any comparable forms, despite the fact that the Rigveda and the Gāthās belong to the same literary genre, is it credible to think of this usage as rhetorical? Can we not think that the very idea of “rhetoric” here is the expression of the tradition that sees Zarathustra as the author and the text’s only voice? In reverse order, Humbach admits, in agreement with later Mazdean tradition, that Zarathustra has contracted a next-of-kin marriage,²² of which the Mazdean religion most peculiarly approved.²³ If next-of-kin marriage, which we consider “incestuous” and which is well documented in the Younger Avesta and in the practices of the royal Persian Achaemenid family, did exist in the gāthic period, tradition should help understand the final Gāthā (Yasna 53), the “marriage chant” of Pourucistā, Zarathustra’s daughter. This is not the case, however. The text does not mention a fiancé, nor do we know who Pourucistā is marrying. However, in order to impose itself socially and to take on its sacred importance, we could think that next-of-kin marriage, so rare since it prevents alliances among families, should be illustrated by the “prophet’s” family.

¹⁷ Humbach (n. 6 above), 1:82.

¹⁸ Ibid., 1:3.

¹⁹ Ibid., 1:1.

²⁰ TVA, 1:17–20; Humbach, 1:9.

²¹ Ibid., 1:9, 82, 107.

²² Ibid., 1:10.

²³ Indeed, one of the topics in the Avestan and Middle Persian tradition is “incestuous” marriage. See Clarisse Herrenschmidt, “Le *xwētōdās* ou mariage ‘incestueux’ en Iran mazdéen,” in P. Bonte, *Épouser au plus proche: Inceste, prohibitions sociales et stratégies matrimoniales autour de la Méditerranée* (Paris, 1994), pp. 113–25.

Humbach's admirable work and his desire to reconcile, through comparison, the Mazdean tradition with Vedic literature leaves one pensive. Perhaps our research is not yet advanced enough to make this desirable encounter possible; perhaps between the moment when the Gāthās were composed and the Achaemenid period, important events took place that remain unknown to us and that make this reconciliation ineffective.

Criticism is easy, but art is difficult, and I know my skills in ancient Iranian philology do not compare to those of the authors cited. Ultimately, I think along the same lines as Insler: "there can be no assurance that the translation of a given passage [of the Gāthās] approaches the intentions originally formulated. . . . When this lack of certainty exists for the greater number of verses within the limited corpus of the Gāthās, we are faced with the fact that much of our knowledge of these poems is highly doubtful."²⁴ This great expert's skepticism gives one a certain amount of courage: if the best understand only partially, what could prevent a researcher, knowledgeable in later Iranian tradition, from risking a reading of these texts since, after all, risk is inherent to research? The reader will have understood that he or she will not find a philological discussion in the following pages, and that I will at times take certain liberties with the translations of the Gāthās quoted earlier while still following generally, but not systematically, Kellens and Pirart.²⁵

But, before proceeding, I would like to spell out what I intend to do: I wish to show that the Zarathustra that the Gāthās show us can pass as the beneficiary of a charismatic domination, according to Max Weber's term, and that the ritual he participates in represents the perpetuation, the "routinization," of this domination. My goal is not to reach a historical truth about Zarathustra—not that I deny any possibility of his existence, but because we truly know too little on this topic. It is possible that, between the partisans of a historical Zarathustra, prophet and author, and those who do not believe he ever existed, research could foray in a third direction whence one knows that no new solutions can be offered, a direction that understands texts in a religious perspective, of course, but also a sociological one.

The Gāthās set forth some of Zarathustra's other qualities, in addition to *manθrān*, "guardian of divine formulae,"²⁶ which we considered earlier. He is the "one who knows" because he has heard Ahura Mazdā's "les-

²⁴ Insler (n. 5 above), p. 2. On several occasions, Humbach (n. 6 above), mentions the difficulties inherent in the Gāthās (e.g., 1:67, 86).

²⁵ P. Oktor Skjaervø gave me his translation of the Gāthās—a "work in progress," according to his own terms; I borrowed some of his ideas and English expressions and thank him very deeply.

²⁶ TVA (n. 4 above), 1:21.

sons” and therefore characterizes himself as “healer of existence.” He has the gift of speech: “Zarathustra is the one who disposes at will of his tongue for the utterance of ritual speech” (Yasna 31.19).²⁷ Like Ahura Mazdā, the Armati entity “Deference,” and the “vision soul”²⁸ (*daēnā*), Zarathustra is “beneficial” (*spenta*); moreover, he is “similar to you” (Ahura Mazdā). As a man, Zarathustra is astonishingly closer to the divine and to Ahura Mazdā.

Kellens and Pirart have been particularly devoted to showing how difficult it is to assert that Zarathustra was the unique speaker of the Gāthās, because he is spoken about and is present during sacrifice in the specific posture of the sacrificer, standing tall, straight, rigid. This has two consequences: the Old Avestan chants are told by a cantor, and this cantor speaks to Ahura Mazdā about Zarathustra.

On that basis, I will proceed by observing the staging of speech acts, the “game” between the cantor and Zarathustra, and the peculiar manner in which his speech and his knowledge are treated in the Ushtavati Gāthā. Why the Ushtavati Gāthā? Because it attests to the only moment when Zarathustra speaks for sure, saying “I” and quoting his own name, and because the crisis that the gāthic community undergoes is mentioned.

The Ushtavati Gāthā is made up of chapters 43–46 of the Yasna “sacrifice,” the major book of the Avesta, chapters that were divided during the later Mazdean tradition many centuries after the text’s oral composition. The composition of this chant has thus posed several problems for the specialists who have often found it heterogeneous. But Mazdeans treated it as a whole; a sufficient reason, I think, to treat it as such.

At the beginning of the Ushtavati Gāthā, Yasna 43, the cantor is the one speaking: he attracts Ahura Mazdā’s blessing onto Zarathustra, who is present and standing, and says (Y.43.3): “May that man (Zarathustra) attain what is better than good, that man who might show us the straight paths of prosperous strength of this corporeal existence and of that of thought,

²⁷ Ibid., 1:117.

²⁸ I am using Skjaervø’s English translation of the Avestan *daēnā*. See the following works by Oktor Skjaervø: “Rivals and Bad Poets: The Poet’s Complaint in the Old Avesta,” in *Philologica et Linguistica—Historia, Pluralitas, Universitas: Festschrift für Helmut Humbach zum 80. Geburtstag am 4. Dezember 2001*, ed. M. G. Schmidt and W. Bisang (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), pp. 351–76; “Ahura Mazda and Armaiti, Heaven and Earth, in the Old Avesta,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (“Indic and Iranian Studies in Honor of Stanley Insler on His Sixty-fifth Birthday,” ed. J. P. Brereton and S. W. Jamison) 122, no. 2 (2002): 399–410; “Praise and Blame in the Avesta: The Poet-Sacrificer and His Duties,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* (“Studies in Honour of Shaul Shaked: I”) 26 (2002): 29–67; “Zarathustra: First Poet-Sacrificer,” in *Paitimna: Essays in Iranian, Indo-European, and Indian Studies*, 2 vols. (in Honor of Hans-Peter Schmidt), ed. S. Adhami (Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda, 2002), 1:1–47.

the true paths leading to the possessions, which a lord inhabits, . . . one like you, of good family, beneficial, O Mazdā!”²⁹

The Ushtavati Gāthā begins with the cantor's praise of Zarathustra to Ahura Mazdā. Zarathustra is present. The cantor says that Zarathustra understands divine concerns, that he can teach the correct ritual (i.e., the direct paths), that he obtains success from the ritual, thanks to which prosperity is given in bony and bodily existence (during life) and in the existence of thought (after death).

Zarathustra speaks from Yasna 43.5 to 43.15 inclusive. His speech is paced by a sentence repeated six times: “I think, O Ahura Mazdā, that you are beneficial.” Why is Ahura Mazdā beneficial? “I think, O Ahura Mazdā, that you are beneficial because I saw that you were first in begetting existence and that you submitted speech and action to reward by attributing bad reward to bad action and bad speech and good bestowing to the good act and good speech, during the last turn of creation” (Y.43.5).

Ahura Mazdā is beneficial because he is at the origin of cosmogony and consequently in a position to reward those who recognize him and give him worship in speech and action, and in a position to punish the others. Rewards, words, and actions are thought of in opposing terms: there are good ones and bad ones. Cosmogonic activity and eschatology do not come separately.

“I think, O Ahura Mazdā that you are beneficial! When he³⁰ surrounds me of Good Thought and asks me ‘Who are you? Whose are you?’ . . . I answer first that I am Zarathustra and that, as much as is in my power, I would like to be a true enemy of the partisan of Deceit and a powerful supporter of the partisan of Order” (Y.43.7–8).

Zarathustra gives his name and says “whose he is,” a way of saying in ancient Iranian that the one speaking recognizes his dependence on a superior, man or god. Desiring to demonstrate his hostility toward Deceit and its partisans, Zarathustra declares that he belongs to Ahura Mazdā and that he supports the partisans of Aša, cosmic and ritual Order.

Later on, to the question, “To whom do you wish to make the gift (of homage)?” Zarathustra answers: “To your fire” (Y.43.9), followed by a passage on ritual and obedience that I find incomprehensible (Y.43.10–12). The three following stanzas lead me to think that Zarathustra is asking that Ahura Mazdā recognize his desire for longevity and a good life, achieved by the ritual performed for him; finally, Zarathustra expresses the wish,

²⁹ I am taking certain liberties here with the text and its interpretations. It is the precondition for writing this article.

³⁰ I do not quite know who this “he” is; as Insler believes, it could be Spenta Manyu, whose name I have translated as “Beneficial Inspirator.” See Clarisse Herensschmidt, “Le rire de Zarathustra, l’Iranien,” in M.-L. Desclos, *Le rire des Grecs* (Grenoble: Jérôme Million, 2002), pp. 497–511.

"May no man exist who wishes to please the many partisans of Deceit! For they say that the partisans of cosmic and ritual Order are bad!" (Y.43.15).

On the whole, what the passages in Zarathustra's first person allow us to understand can be organized in the following manner: Zarathustra has seen that Ahura Mazdā is the one who originally set the world in place, that he rewards or punishes people depending on whether their words and deeds have been good or bad; Zarathustra declares that he belongs to Ahura Mazdā, that it is through his fire that he gives him worship in order to achieve longevity and a good life; and, finally, that Mazdeans, as partisans of cosmic and ritual Order, should not bond with partisans of Deceit for they consider partisans of Order "bad."

Zarathustra's revelation takes place through vision, and he is spoken to by a divine character, who could be either Ahura Mazdā or Spenta Manyu (the Beneficial Inspirator). His doctrine is one of salvation, one that always seeks to resolve conflict by separating his allies from the others.

The final stanza of chapter 43 has the cantor speaking: "O Ahura Mazdā, here is Zarathustra, he chooses your Inspirator who is so beneficial" (Y.43.16). He continues to speak throughout chapter 44; he asks questions that begin with the chorus saying, "I ask you this, tell me well, O Ahura"—questions that Ahura Mazdā does not answer. The cantor wishes that "May one who is like you, O Mazdā, explain to me, his friend, how the homage should be" (Y.44.1). According to Kellens and Pirart, stanza 2 spells out the "program of the entire questioning that will follow: what is the origin of ritual existence, from the organization of its cosmic substratum to the eschatological reward that is its achievement."³¹ Stanzas 3–7 are some of the most comprehensible and most beautiful in the gāthīc corpus:

I ask you this: tell me well, O Mazdā! Who is, by begetting, Aša's primordial father? Who determined that the path of the sun would be here and that of the stars there? Who makes the moon wax then wane? These are the things I wish to know, O Mazdā, and others as well.

I ask you this: tell me well, O Mazdā! Who has maintained the earth down and the clouds above, preventing them from falling? Who placed here the waters and there the plants? Who harnessed the two (coursers) for the wind and the clouds? Who then, O Mazdā, planted the stakes [of the cosmic hut] intended for Good Thought?

I ask you this: tell me well, O Mazdā! Which artisan placed here the light and there the darkness? Which artisan placed sleep here and awakening there? Who is he through whom there is dawn, noon and night, moments that remind the one who desires of something to be gained?

³¹ TVA (n. 4 above), 3:171.

I ask you this: tell me well, O Mazdā! . . . Who placed standing on this earth[?] . . . a son for the father?³²

The cantor ends his questioning with his own answer: “[I know] O Mazdā that you are the author of all these instauration[s].” Speaking in Zarathustra’s silent presence, the cantor states what Zarathustra has learned through his vision. The stanzas that follow are rather opaque. We can nonetheless state that they revolve around the question of souls, of the personal soul (*urvān*) and the vision soul (*daēnā*), perception of the divine world, visual intuition, and hypostasis of Mazdean religion.³³ And we can assume that the main point is the survival of the Mazdean subject after death (Y.44.8–9). Next the text treats the problem of differentiating between good and bad men: “Who is partisan of cosmic and ritual Order and who is partisan of Deceit?” (Y.44.12). The cantor also asks how to rid oneself of Deceit in order to access Ahura Mazdā’s kindness, how to pass it on to one’s enemies, those who, “full of disobedience, do not cultivate association with cosmic and ritual Order” (Y.44.13). One can hear the combative tone: how does one strengthen the internal division among the partisans of Deceit that will lead them to “torment and hardship”? (Y.44.14). The end of the chapter puts the payment of debt in perspective, the punishment for not paying, and, perhaps, the final punishment.

The cantor never stops asking questions of Ahura Mazdā, who does not answer. The god does not address himself to the cantor, but the cantor gives a general answer, which consists in affirming Ahura Mazdā’s cosmogonic responsibility. By exposing at length what Zarathustra concisely expressed in chapter 43 as the content of his vision, the cantor speaks for Zarathustra in his silent presence and tells Ahura Mazdā what Zarathustra has perceived about him. The cantor has no name; he is not personified. In a way, he represents the Zoroastrian Mazdean.

Chapter 45 is unique in the gāthic corpus insofar as it is not entirely addressed to Ahura Mazdā;³⁴ Insler thought it was addressed from Zarathustra to his followers,³⁵ and Kellens believes it to be directed toward the assembly of gods, among whom the cantor is choosing in order to eliminate demons.³⁶ It seems that it is Zarathustra who speaks, chooses, and divulges “the word fundamental to this existence which Ahura Mazdā the

³² Kellens, *Zoroastre et l’Avesta ancien* (n. 15 above), p. 44.

³³ The *daēnā* (“vision soul”) has become in Younger Avesta the religious soul characterized by its appearance and which qualifies itself through its outward presentation: young and beautiful if the dead Mazdean was good, old and ugly if he was bad. As is rather frequent, the being that sees (*daēnā*) is characterized by what one sees of him (vision implies light, light implies visibility).

³⁴ TVA, 3:185.

³⁵ Insler (n. 5 above), p. 254.

³⁶ Kellens, *Le panthéon de l’Avesta ancien* (n. 15 above), pp. 58–87.

one who knows told me" (Y.45.3); on the one hand, we saw that Ahura Mazdā is not speaking to the cantor and, on the other, that Zarathustra is said to be "the one who knows," like Ahura Mazdā, because the god exposed him to his teachings.

What is this chapter about? It is about basic definitions: "I will proclaim that there are two fundamental Inspirators of existence, I will say which of the two is the one we will call most beneficial and which most bad" (Y.45.2). "I will proclaim the word fundamental to this existence which the one who knows Ahura Mazdā told me. 'For those among you who will not apply this word in the way I mean it and proclaim it, the last word of existence will be: alas'" (Y.45.3). Insler rightfully called these definitions "the basic precepts concerning the nature and importance of faith in and devotion to Ahura Mazdā."³⁷ Thus, "I shall proclaim the best word of this existence: 'I know that it is Ahura Mazdā who established this existence according to the cosmic and ritual Order, that he is the father of Vohu Manah (Good Thought), that Armati (Deference) of good deeds is his daughter'" (Y.45.4). "The personal soul of the partisan of cosmic and ritual Order is capable of gaining access to immortality and youth" (Y.45.7). After these pronouncements, Zarathustra seems to evoke certain aspects of the ritual that, covering Ahura Mazdā in praise and satisfying him, aim at prosperity for himself and his companions.

The final stanza is addressed to Ahura Mazdā: "He who has shown contempt for bad gods and for bad men who have shown contempt for him and who are the enemies of whomever shows deference to Ahura Mazdā, that one, like the beneficial vision-soul [*daēnā*] of a sacrificing house master is an ally, a brother or a father" (Y.45.11).

If we admit that chapter 45 partially resists our understanding, we can nonetheless try to draw some conclusions. If Zarathustra is the one speaking (except, perhaps, for the final stanza), we can observe the movement of his speech. He starts off with the necessary separation from demons, then sets forth certain fundamental beliefs, such as the kinship between Ahura Mazdā, Good Thought (Vohu Manah), and Deference (Armati), and finally reminds his listener of the happiness achieved by giving worship to Ahura Mazdā. Excluding the bad gods and separating them from their partisans permits him to consider the future of the faithful; to exclude and separate are conditions of good worship and good life. That is why, however tenuous, there is a link with the final stanza. In it, the hymn focuses on social relationships and alliances that the Mazdeans need as well as the difficulty of distinguishing an ally from an enemy. One thing is sure: he who sacrifices like the gāthic group does is an ally.

³⁷ Insler, p. 254.

For a long time, chapter 46, which is equally complex, was read as the most clearly autobiographical part of the Gāthās, the one in which Zarathustra complains about not knowing where to flee and where Vishtāspa accepts the revelation. This more or less remains Insler's opinion.³⁸ This interpretation is based on the conviction that Zarathustra is the one speaking throughout.

The first ten stanzas are clearly addressed to Ahura Mazdā (Y.46.1–10), whereas stanza 14 is addressed to Zarathustra and Ahura Mazdā. There is a change of interlocutor and probably of speaker as well, but nothing allows us to determine who is speaking,³⁹ the cantor or Zarathustra. What precedes, however, can help us. We saw in chapter 43 that Zarathustra was alluding to cosmogony, a theme that the cantor treats again in chapter 44 by asking questions to Ahura Mazdā, who does not answer. These are questions to which Zarathustra obviously knows the answers. I believe the same technique is used in chapter 46. The cantor asks questions that remain without answers and thus develops, in an allusive form, what precedes, meaning the final stanza of chapter 45; the topic is therefore social and political relations, which brings up the following problem: How does one deal with a hostile environment? The cantor seems to personify the Mazdean, he who accepts Ahura Mazdā as Zarathustra teaches.

The cantor complains, "Towards what earth, where will I go? They⁴⁰ take me apart from my family and my tribe; the clans to which I want to belong do not satisfy me, nor the leaders of the nation, who are partisans of Deceit. How can I satisfy you, O Ahura Mazdā?" He is poor: "I know why, O Mazdā, I am incapable: it is because I have so little cattle and so few men. I lament to you. See this, O Ahura, offering the help that the friend offers the friend!" (Y.46.1, 2). Later, we discover that no power comes to the rescue of the partisan of Order (the cantor). But, once again, we must understand that Zarathustra's silence is significant. Zarathustra, his revelation (that Ahura Mazdā ordered the world and promised heaven to he who gives worship to him), and the acceptance of this revelation constitute the power that the cantor desires.

The cantor, the Mazdean, must distinguish between the partisan of Order and the partisan of Deceit and push him away. He has no protector in this world, aside from Ahura Mazdā's fire, the visible form of the cosmic and ritual Order, Aša, and son of Ahura Mazdā. He curses whoever wrongs him by violence and wishes a community for himself with whom to face death and the afterlife: "O Ahura Mazdā, the man or woman whose

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 262 ff.

³⁹ About another passage, Humbach (n. 6 above), p. 86, talks about the ambiguity of the gathic text, which prevents us from knowing who is speaking.

⁴⁰ It is difficult to know who represents this "they."

[thoughts, words, and deeds] of existence you know to be very good and who by Good Thought gives a gift to Order . . . , it is with them that I wish to cross the mason's bridge" (Y.46.10). He sees that such people exist, the descendants of Tura, son of Frya. The cantor asks Zarathustra: "Zarathustra, which partisan of the Order is your law-abiding companion . . . ?" As in chapter 44, Zarathustra does not answer, and the cantor, who knows the answer, introduces the *kavi* Vishtāspa (Y.46.3–14).

It is possible that Vishtāspa, the *kavi* ("sacred poet"), is the one speaking in the following three stanzas, calling on the members of the gāthic circle by their names—the Spitāma descendants of Hicataspa, Frashaoshtra, and Djāmāspa descendant of Hugu (Y.46.15–17)—while at the same time alluding to a word in verse or prose, that is, to the rhetorical and poetic art that the *kavi* knows by function. As in chapter 44, the chapter ends with an obscure allusion to a priest's salary and to the eschatological reward.

Chapter 44 used the voice of the cantor to develop the program implicit in Zarathustra's earlier declarations. Chapter 46 proceeds in similar manner, but, instead of reading a program that we could call theological, we discover its social and political consequences. The cantor mentions the Mazdean's difficulty in a hostile world where one must distinguish friend from enemy, where alliances are necessary for he who has "few men," where powerful people, richer than the cantor and his group, exert negative pressure. Then he calls on his kin; Zarathustra is still present and silent. As in Yasna 44, this silence has meaning: not only does Zarathustra know all the solutions to the problems that the cantor poses regarding orientation in the political and social world, but his physical presence also embodies the answers to the questions. By his very silence, we understand that Zarathustra has endowed his allies with a doctrine and has roused them.

Despite the fact that we do not know the rules of gāthic ritual, we can note that speech is given in a precise rhetorical style, determined by precedence and order in enunciation "games." For instance, asking questions is equal to an act of submission through language; praising a man in his presence and addressing him to the gods means treating him as the divine are treated, installing a clear distance between the cantor and the *man-θrān*. Depending on the use of certain forms of speech, interrogation, or praise, there is an expression of social and sacred hierarchy. The uses of speech between Zarathustra, the cantor, and the members of the gāthic group form concentric circles that represent a chorus around Zarathustra's word, which seems founding, authoritative, and economized.

Speech, however, is not only one of the principal means of exchange between men and gods; it also constitutes the first place of social and political relations, the tool of affirmation of power and hierarchy. I think the

Ushtavati Gāthā seems to stage, through the nameless cantor who represents the Zoroastrian Mazdean, Zarathustra's sacred authority: it is founded by the verticality of his exchange with the gods. As a public and human form of divine speech, his word and the authority it represents construct hierarchy. Zarathustra is separate from other Mazdeans (in a way, he is the only one who is not "Zoroastrian"). But some, like Vishtāspa, are closer to him; around Zarathustra there is a core of men who form a community capable of initiative.

The Gāthās' political character—and not just those from the Ushtavati Gāthā—had impressed Meillet,⁴¹ and later Kellens and Pirart.⁴² But we know nothing about the historical reality of this conflict, and it is still possible that evoking a conflict is an integral part of the system of thought that orders gods, men, and the world into separate and opposing poles.

But it seems to me that the success of these texts, the worship given to them, stems from the fact that they convey not only a religious doctrine, probably an innovative one, but also a foundation of power, an explanation of the social and sacred hierarchy, tied to the verticality of Zarathustra's revelation.

Had we not known anything of the history of Mazdeism and if Zarathustra had not represented a major religious problem in Europe, perhaps we could say that the Ushtavati Gāthā represents something of a sacred king or a prophet king, named Zarathustra, surrounded by a circle of particularly deferent faithful.

Perceiving the gāthic texts' political character is complicated by the fact that, when referring to Zarathustra, they do not use terms that belong to the known political vocabulary, nor an Iranian equivalent of the Sanskrit "king" (*rāj*) or "clan chief" (*viśampati*), for example, nor the ancestor of *xšāyaθiya* ("king") in Old Persian. Still, the absence of any political term is compensated for by the pragmatic system of speech: if there is no title for the one who has power, if there is no "charisma" concept, there is a place for Zarathustra's word, and his word is central.

The absence of any inherited title that would have been common to Old Avestan and Sanskrit shows that there must have been a break with a previous tradition about which we know nothing. This rupture, which we cannot attribute a priori to Zarathustra, can be thought of in connection with the religious innovation of Mazdean Iran—a question that has fascinated historians of religion working on Iran and about which no one seems to agree. At the very least, we can say that Iran was innovative in its eschatological beliefs, structurally associated with the development of the concepts of order/truth (Sanskrit *rta*, Avestan *aša*) and of confusion/deceit (Sanskrit *druh*, Avestan *druj*), and that Iran gave greater importance to

⁴¹ A. Meillet, *Trois conférences sur les Gāthās de l'Avesta* (Paris, 1925).

⁴² TVA, 1:22–26.

sight/vision (thus the huge part played by the *daēnā*), whereas India preferred revelation through hearing. These innovations recover a transformation of the ritual practices and their meaning.

The gāthīc text accompanies the ritual, about which we can say that it had to include the sacrifice of speech, the maintenance of fire, the killing of an animal, libations, and the preparation and ingestion of a liquor (the *haoma*). The recited texts say why the ritual is what it is, show the social and political hierarchy founded on sacredness, and serve as a system of gestural and oral signs that permit an exclusive identification of the group.

What is the gāthīc ritual's aim? To reassure man—to procure peace and prosperity in both lives: the bodily existence of the here and now, on the one hand, and the existence of thought and the afterlife on the other. It unites members of the community around this collective goal; there is a desirable social order, the one that guarantees Mazdeans prosperity in both lives—because this traditional society, which was the gāthīc community, like any Mazdean society in Iran, existed as a society within a spiritual framework that guaranteed the coexistence of the individuals it gathered. This tension toward a desirable order was not pure speculation; it was concerned with making sure that image became reality. Ritual fulfilled the function of “cog in the machine,” imposing its multiple rules, thereby constraining gestures, behavior, economic reward, and speech.

We can admit, as Wittgenstein thought, that ritual is rational and a demonstration of rationality.⁴³ The demonstration is all the more clear, I would add, for the fact that a ritual chooses speech as its mode of expression. Much like Max Weber thought regarding India and China, the rationality of Mazdean ritual leads me to think that ritual can be the matrix of law. This is what the ancient Iranian tradition helps us understand. In Old Persian, “law” is *dāta*, a word that can be used for “the law of the king” or for religious law, the “law which Ahura Mazdā founded,” as Xerxes wrote referring to the ritual of Mazdean sacrifice according to the prescribed norms.⁴⁴ The word *dāta* means “what is instituted, set down, installed” and stems from the same root (*dā*) as the title *dātar*, which Ahura Mazdā bore: the “creator” (of the cosmos, time, and humanity). Thus, the activity of the god that seems creative to us expressed itself in ancient Iran through the idea of “setting down, instituting.” If the idea of “rule” is expressed through the word *urvāta*, “that which is straight,” this word is associated with the root *dā*—“to set down, to institute,” as in “the rules which Mazdā institutes” (Y.30.11).

⁴³ Thanks to Philippe de Lara for having lent me his thesis to read: “L’homme rituel: Wittgenstein, sociologie et anthropologie” (unpublished manuscript, Paris, 2000).

⁴⁴ See Xerxes’ *daiva* inscription, lines 49–50, in Roland G. Kent, *Old Persian: Grammar, Texts, Lexicon*, 2d ed. (Ann Arbor, Mich.: American Oriental Society, 1953), pp. 150–52, plate 3.

We understand that the idea of “law” might be expressed by a word from the same family as the creative aspect of the god and the gestural institution of ritual. In Mazdean Iran, ritual functions as the repetition of the god’s cosmogonic activity⁴⁵ and reproduces the exact order of divine creation. It is characterized by exact order in its language, gestures, and speech and it founds social statuses and functions on sacredness, thereby constituting the matrix of law.

What have we learned thus far? That Zarathustra, the charismatic prophet, in the Weberian sense of the word, is at the center of a verticality of speech. He has received, from above, the lessons of Ahura Mazdā and transmitted them down to the members of his group, who take them for their own purposes. They judge him to be different from them, superior and similar to the gods. The ritual instituted in the gestures and phrases and expressing the hierarchy of roles constitutes the conceptual matrix of the law. The text transmits its inseparable political and social realization, namely, that the exchange of words between Ahura Mazdā and a man gives that man the power.

Thus, it seems to me that the type of ritual through speech that we have seen operate in the *Ushtavati Gāthā* consecrates Zarathustra’s charismatic domination and constitutes the means and the place of its conservation, perhaps even its “routinization.” This is to say that the ritual form gives substance to the establishment of statuses (Zarathustra’s) and functions (the cantor, the members of the community) that obtain their existence from the religious sphere and find their application in social and political life.

This interpretation can help us review the history of ancient Iran. Indeed, I think certain analogies can be found between the Zarathustra present in the *Ushtavati Gāthā* and the Achaemenid kings in their inscriptions and bas-reliefs.⁴⁶

The Great King, in the inscriptions, like Zarathustra and the cantor, praises Ahura Mazdā and prays to the god; on the bas-reliefs, he faces the winged character that represents Ahura Mazdā and dominates the king. The king, taller than the others, is alone in front of the god. Placed on a superior level and isolated from the other men, he is nonetheless the one they look at, that toward which their bodies are directed. Zarathustra and the king fulfill the intermediary function—positioned between god and man, there is a clear distance between them and the members of gāthic and Achaemenid Persian societies.

⁴⁵ Herrenschmidt and Kellens (n. 15 above).

⁴⁶ Regarding Achaemenid history, see Pierre Briant’s admirable work, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2002).

Like Zarathustra, the Great King says his own name. Declaring that "Ahura Mazdā created this earth and created that sky,"⁴⁷ he knows, like Zarathustra and the cantor, that the god is responsible for cosmogony. Like them, he makes the link between cosmogony and eschatology, because he also says that faith in a happy afterlife was given to man by Ahura Mazdā.

Like Zarathustra and the cantor, the king clearly states that worship given to Ahura Mazdā with a formula⁴⁸ "according to cosmic and ritual Order" will make the Mazdean happy during life and will lead him to heaven after.⁴⁹

Darius I and Xerxes, in different ways, affirm that they are here, like Zarathustra in the Gāthās, to favor the Mazdean, his territory, and his group and to destroy he who does not give worship to Ahura Mazdā and instead worships the demons, the forbidden gods.

It may be useful to compare the place that Zarathustra and the cantor occupied in the Ushtavati Gāthā and the place of the king in the Achaemenid period in the inscriptions. Does the Great King take on Zarathustra's or the cantor's role? At this point, I cannot say. It is possible also that an assimilation took place from one to the other: I think the Great King crystallizes in his speech Zarathustra's role when he says "I," and that of the cantor, the Zoroastrian Mazdean. I cannot assert that the great Persian king held the function of a prophet who was also a priest, but that the conservation of ancient charismatic domination, in and by Mazdean ritual, itself the matrix of law, had constituted the mold in which the Achaemenid royalty was formed.

We can now say that the ritual that accompanies the Gāthās constitutes a pragmatic application of Zarathustra's word, which is both sacred and politically commanding. These are certainly priests speaking, who take on the part of ritualistic performance. But who pays them? Who is the sacrificer par excellence if not, during the Achaemenid period, the Great King?

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⁴⁷ This is how most royal Achaemenid inscriptions begin.

⁴⁸ It seems that in Old Persian the idea of "formula" was expressed through the word *brazman* rather than *manθra*.

⁴⁹ As expressed in Xerxes' *daiva* inscription, lines 46–56.